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Diabetes and the Health Care Team

Ingrid Adams, Dietetics and Human Nutrition

Diabetes is a disease that affects many parts of the body, such as the eyes, kidneys, blood vessels, heart, legs and feet. As a result, a team approach to taking care of the disease can be very helpful. When a team of individuals works together problems are identified earlier, and it is easier to reduce or prevent diabetes complications.

You, your doctor and family members may be the initial members of your team. Other team members may include a registered dietitian, certified diabetes educator, diabetes nurse, pharmacist, dentist, eye doctor, foot doctor, social worker and a mental health counselor.

You are the most important member on the team. You are the person living with diabetes, and you know how you feel and what you are experiencing. Your responsibility is to communicate the feelings and problems you are experiencing to your doctor and other members of your team.

Family members and friends may assist in the challenges of the day-to-day management of diabetes such as monitoring blood glucose, planning meals, taking medications, and being physically active. Family members and close friends can provide support and relieve some of the burden. To help your family and friends provide the best support, you should help them understand the disease.

Your doctor is the person you visit for general check-ups and when you are sick. Your doctor coordinates your care and sends you to a specialist if you have eye, kidney, heart, foot or nerve problems. An **endocrinologist** is a doctor who specializes in treating diabetes. You may see an endocrinologist if your diabetes is difficult to control.

Questions to ask your doctor:

- What target range should I have for my blood glucose?
- How is my blood pressure?
- How is my blood cholesterol?
- Do I have symptoms of nerve damage?
- Are my feet healthy?
- Do I have signs of kidney disease?
- Should I get a flu or pneumonia vaccine?
- When next should I see you?

Registered dietician

A registered dietician (RD) is trained in nutrition; some RDs have special training in working with people with diabetes. Your doctor can refer you to a dietitian. The RD will help you design a meal plan that fits your needs. Your food choices help determine whether your blood glucose is kept within the target range, so eating correctly is very important. An RD can give you tips on making good food choices, reading food labels and balancing what you eat with how much you exercise.

Questions to ask your RD:

- How do I make good food choices?
- What foods cause my blood glucose to rise quickly?
- Are there foods I can eat a lot of?
- What foods should I choose when I am eating out?
- How do I find recipes for people with diabetes?
- How can I cook for my family if they don't have diabetes?
- How do I include cultural foods into my meal plan?
- How can I afford to follow a diabetic diet?
- How do I eat when I am sick?
- What is the best diet to follow to lose weight?
- Can I drink alcohol?

Certified diabetes educator (CDE)

A certified diabetes educator (CDE) has special training in teaching people with diabetes how to manage the disease. Many times this is a nurse, but not always. CDEs provide information on diabetes and how it affects the body, how to deal with high and low blood glucose levels and how to adjust insulin when you are sick or taking part in physical activity. They also teach you about giving insulin injections and using a glucose meter.

Questions to ask your CDE:

- What is type 2 diabetes and what are the symptoms?
- How do I manage my diabetes?
- How does diabetes affect my eyes, kidneys, heart, and nerves?
- How do I use a glucose meter to check my blood glucose?
- What should I do if my blood glucose numbers are too low or too high?
- How do I give myself insulin injections?
- How do I cope with diabetes?

Pharmacist

Pharmacists provide information and counseling on medicines and can help with the selection of blood glucose meters and over-the-counter diabetes supplies. Pharmacists are able to recognize signs of diabetes complication and make referrals to other professionals on your health care team.

It is best to fill your prescriptions at the same pharmacy so that your records are all in one place. Let the pharmacist know all the medicines you are taking, including herbal supplements, because they can interact with your diabetes medicine. It is important to talk to the pharmacist about problems you are having with your diabetes medicines (or any medicines you take) each time you fill a prescription.

Questions to ask your pharmacist:

- How should I take the medicine?
- What should I do if I miss a dose?
- How will I know if the medicine is working?
- What are some of the side effects of taking this medicine?
- What should I avoid when taking this medicine?
- How should I store the medicine?
- Do I need a refill?

Ophthalmologist

An ophthalmologist is a doctor who specializes in diseases of the eye. Too much glucose in the blood and high blood pressure can damage the tiny blood vessels in the eyes. This is called diabetic retinopathy.

Questions to ask your ophthalmologist:

- Do I have eye problems?
- Do I need to start wearing glasses or do I need new glasses?
- Do I need special treatment?
- What can I do to take care of my eyes?
- What should I do if I notice changes in my vision?
- Can I drive?

Podiatrist

A podiatrist is a doctor trained to prevent, diagnose and treat problems of the lower legs. People with diabetes can develop nerve damage and lose feeling in their legs and feet due to poor blood flow. This loss of feeling makes it difficult to feel pain, heat, or cold, so it is easy to get cuts and sores on your feet and not know it. If these go untreated they can lead to serious infections and, in some cases, can lead to amputations.

Questions to ask your podiatrist:

- How well do the nerves in my feet sense feeling?
- How is the blood flow to my legs and feet?
- Are there changes in my feet?
- What is the best way to trim my toenails?
- What type of lotion or cream should I use on my legs and feet?
- What are the best types of shoes to wear?
- Can special shoes help my feet?
- How can I care for my feet?

Dentist

Dentists take care of your teeth, mouth and gums. People with diabetes are more likely to have gum disease especially if their blood sugar is not well controlled.

Questions to ask your dentist:

- Do I have signs of tooth, mouth or gum problems?
- How should I protect my teeth?
- What is the correct way to brush and floss my teeth?
- What should I do to keep my teeth, mouth and gums healthy?

Mental health professionals

People with diabetes are more likely to be depressed than people without diabetes. The daily tasks needed to manage diabetes can become overwhelming, especially if a person has diabetes complications such as nerve damage or kidney or eye problems.

Let your doctor know if you no longer find enjoyment in the things that once brought you pleasure, if you notice changes in sleep patterns and appetite, if you feel tired all the time, or have suicidal thoughts. Your doctor will work with you to identify the reasons for these symptoms and may suggest you see a mental health professional.

A mental health professional may be a social worker, counselor or a psychiatrist. These members of your team help with the social and emotional side of living with diabetes.

The **social worker** may help you find resources to help with your medical and financial needs.

Questions to ask your social worker:

- What kind of costs does Medicare cover?
- Is there somewhere I can get help with the costs of diabetes?

The **psychologist** or **counselor** helps with emotional and stress problems that relate to diabetes management.

Questions to ask your psychologist or counselor:

- Is depression normal for persons with diabetes?
- How do I deal with my feelings and emotions?
- Can my emotions raise my blood glucose?
- Where can I find support for depression and stress?

The **psychiatrist** is a medical doctor who can prescribe medication to treat emotional problems and provide some counseling.

Questions to ask your psychiatrist:

- If I have to take medicine, what are the side effects?
- Are there other treatments?
- How will my medicine affect my blood glucose levels?

Tests to see how well you are managing your diabetes and if you are at risk for diabetes complications.

Test	How often should I be tested?	Pointers
Blood pressure	Every visit	
Weight	Every visit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify changes in weight.
Foot check	Every visit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remove your socks and shoes as a reminder for your doctor to check your feet.
Blood glucose monitoring	Every visit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bring your diabetes record book.
A1C test	At least twice a year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More often if your A1C level is over 7 and for other reasons determined by your doctor.
Dental exam	Twice a year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teeth cleaning and check-up. • Problems to mention: sore, red, inflamed, bleeding gums; toothache, denture and other pain; infections; cold or canker sores.
Complete eye exam	Once a year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dilated eye exam • Problems to mention: dry itchy eyes; eye pain; blurred or poor vision. • Ask about cataracts and glaucoma
Complete foot exam	Once a year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check feeling and pulses in feet. • Check blood flow to legs and feet. • Problems to mention: dry skin; cuts or sores; corns, calluses, bunions, ingrown toenails; infections.
Blood lipid tests	Once a year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cholesterol and triglyceride
Kidney function tests	Once a year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urine and blood test to check for kidney function. (Kidney damage from diabetes happens slowly so you may not feel sick at all for many years.) • Problems to mention: swelling in hands and feet.

My health care team

Team member	Name and address	Phone number
Doctor		
Registered dietitian		
Certified diabetes educator		
Pharmacist		
Eye doctor (ophthalmologist)		
Foot doctor (podiatrist)		
Dentist		
Counselor		

Resources

American Diabetes Association. <http://www.diabetes.org/>.

National Diabetes Education Program. <http://diabetes.niddk.nih.gov/>.

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